

Editorial: Jobs: Weigh all aspects

Everyone wants more jobs and prosperity in West Virginia. It's a universal goal.

For that purpose, the Legislature's new majority wants to make West Virginia a "right to work" state. Supporters say more businesses will be attracted if a small limitation is placed on labor unions. This topic should be studied thoroughly.

The 1947 Taft-Hartley Act — passed over President Truman's veto — bans "closed shops" or "union shops" in which only union members may work. But it approves "agency shops." These let some workers refuse to join unions, but they must pay fees for representation by union agents. (The federal government does not allow agency shops — for U.S. government employees.)

The proposed right-to-work law merely prevents unions from collecting fees from workers who choose not to join. That's all.

Actually, this issue involves only a tiny fringe of workers, because organized labor has disintegrated in America. Only 6.6 percent of America's private-sector workers now belong to unions — the lowest rate since 1932 — the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported on Jan. 23. This means 93.4 percent of American jobholders aren't unionized.

West Virginia's state government has about 40,000 workers — but only around 500 of them belong to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union, and just 1,100 belong to the new West Virginia Public Workers Union. Government employees generally have freedom to decide whether to join unions, or whether to abstain and avoid paying dues. A right-to-work law wouldn't affect most of them.

Stormy emotions are roused by the battle in the Legislature. But calm folks should remember: The tempest affects just a few — not even the 6.6 percent who belong to unions, but only the subgroup whose union gets fees from non-joiners.

Everyone wants what will help West Virginia. We hope the Legislature chooses a beneficial course.